

Tape: 050

## **Transcript of Interview with John Russiff**

Conducted by Cecil Roberts

June 4, 1996

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## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN RUSSIFF

**[Disclaimer: This interview has not been fully edited. Name and place spellings have not been confirmed. No acronyms are explained, nor any explanatory footnotes provided. There may also be portions of the interview that are incomplete because the transcriber could not understand what the speaker was saying.]**

Cecil: This is a BLM oral history interview. And the interview is being conducted with John Russiff at his home in downtown Denver on the morning of August 4th. Start over again. June 4th, 1996. The interviewer is Cecil Roberts. John, why don't we start with your telling us a little bit about your background, where you grew up and what kind of a situation was, your role, and so forth.

John: I was born in 1923 in southeastern Montana, near Broadus. Our address is Olive, Montana. It was a cattle and wheat ranch. I attended a rural school there the first seven years. I attended high school first in Broadus for a year and a half and then went to Miles City and graduated there. I also went to Junior College in Miles City for one year in 1943-44. In 1944, I went to the University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, and majored in forestry and range management.

Cecil: Graduated when?

John: In 1948. June of 1948.

Cecil: Did you work in natural resources type jobs in the summers, college summers?

John: Yes, during the summers of 1943 and 1944, I worked at a Forest Service Range Experiment Station in Miles City, Montana, on range studies. Then during the next two summers, I worked at the Sula Ranger Station, in the Bitterroot National Forest as a fire dispatcher.

Cecil: Sula, that's S U L A? And whereabouts is that?

John: That's in the southwestern part of the state of Montana, near Hamilton.

Cecil: Okay. So that was the summers of '44 and '45 were the range experiment station and '46 and '47 on the Sula District, is that right?

John: Right. Then after I graduated at the University of Montana, my first job was with the Forest Service at Ennis, Montana, as an alternate ranger.

Cecil: Alternate ranger?

John: Yeah.

Cecil: Okay. And then you went to work for BLM when?

John: In October of 1948 at Malta, Montana

Cecil: Tell us a little bit about the employment process and the hiring that went into it.

John: Well, I was interviewed by the BLM District Manager, Fred Benson, from the White Hall District in Montana which is now the Dillon District. I was on a fire and.

Cecil: And he came to the fire?

John: Yes, he came to the fire and interviewed me and recommended me to the Regional Office in Billings, and I was hired. They asked me at the time if my name was on the civil service register which it had been. When they asked for the

Civil Service register, my name was not on it. The Civil Service Commission informed me that if I had turned down three job offers that my name was automatically taken off of the register. Thinking back, I had turned down three job offers from the Soil Conservation Service. This is an indication of how loosely things were run at that time in that they hired me before they asked for the register. It was very nice of them to let me continue in my position until I got back on the register.

Cecil: You went to work with BLM in Malta, Montana, in the fall of 1948?

John: Yes, in October.

Cecil: And what was your job there?

John: I was a range manager. I was the first professional with a college education that worked on that district. The District Manager's background was ranching. When I reported there, the first day he called me into his office and told me what my duties would be and what my responsibilities were. It appeared I was going to be working on every facet in the district. Montana at that time, and I guess still does, have the state grazing districts. The boards in these Districts made recommendations in allocation of grazing privileges and issuance of licenses on land within the BLM District. So, one of my primary duties was to attend the board meetings to see that they were following BLM regulations and guide them in allocation of grazing privileges. Two or 3 months after I was in the District, I found out there was another duty I was really not aware of, that was Section 15 leases. Section 15 of the Federal Range Code provided for lease of public domain lands outside of BLM Grazing Districts. The Bureau of Land Management became an agency in 1946 by consolidating the Grazing Service and the General Land Office. Prior to becoming the Bureau of Land Management, the Section 15 leases were administered by the General Land Office. The General Land Office had turned those leases over to the BLM when they closed the office. When I got there, there were boxes stacked in the offices containing some 400 Section 15 leases. I really didn't know what a Section 15 lease was until one day a rancher came in and asked about his

Section 15 lease. I didn't know what he was talking about. But, anyway, the secretary said, there's a whole bunch of boxes of leases that the General Land Office had sent to us. I dug through those boxes and found his lease that had been expired for a couple of years. And so that was my introduction to a nightmare. So, for the next 3-1/2 years that was another one of my principal jobs which involved going out and checking those leases and to update expired leases and resolve boundary disputes. The District Manager told me that those were going to be my responsibility including approving and signing the leases. Later the Regional Office told us that I did not have the authority to sign them. Anyway, the fact that I had already signed some 100 or more, they gave me special authorization to continue approving and signing these leases. Anyway, I became very familiar with Section 15 leases and also negotiating allotment boundary lines with a bunch of ranchers. Later, there were inquiries about land exchanges, small tract sales, and other land matters, and so not knowing too much about those, I became familiar with them very fast the hard way. With the District Manager not being around very much, it was through necessity that it became my responsibility. It also became my responsibility to design and stake out stock water reservoirs which was not in my job description.

Cecil: A couple of thoughts on that, John. How many people were employed in the District when you went to work there?

John: I think there was about five of us. The District Manager, a soil and watershed person, a predator control individual, the secretary, and myself. That's five in the district at that time.

Cecil: And you were the only one with any formal resource management education?

John: That's right.

Cecil: Was there any particular resentment toward you at that time because of that?

John: There was some resentment at first. In fact, when I reported there, the soil watershed specialist and the predator control person each thought they were going to get this job and so when I reported, they were quite disappointed. There was some resentment for a while, but things improved. We had a good working relationship and even were good friends.

Cecil: Picking up with your comment also about the District Manager was absent a lot, where was he, was he sick, was he attending meetings or what kept him away from the office so much?

John: He had another business and was spending more time on it than as a District Manager for BLM. It eventually caught up with him and that ended his career with BLM.

Cecil: The programs then in the Malta District were primarily range. And you mentioned a little bit of lands programs, sales, and exchanges. Was there anything else of significance at that time?

John: There was a large soil and watershed program. There was a sizable amount of funds appropriated for erosion control in the Missouri River Badlands.

Cecil: Yeah, okay.

John: There was also a predator control program at that time.

Cecil: So, you went to work there in the fall of '48 and when did you leave Malta?

John: I left in July of 1952. I went from one extreme to another. I transferred to the Las Vegas District as an Assistant District Manager in July of 1952.

Cecil: About how many people worked in Las Vegas in 1952?

John: Probably about 10 to 12. I would like to mention that the District Manager had not informed the people in the District. There again, that I was reporting there, so it came as rather a surprise. The first morning when I reported, I met one of the individuals that thought that he was going to get the job. He drove up in a BLM pickup in the parking lot, so I asked him where the BLM office was. I told him what I was there for and that was the first that he knew of that I was there for the job he wanted. Again, I was taking a job that someone else had their sights on. A big program there was small tracts because of, well, Las Vegas at that time was growing very fast and the demand for the adjoining public lands was unbelievable. BLM was doing a booming land office business.

Cecil: It was a boom town then like it is now?

John: It was the beginning of the boom.

Cecil: I see.

John: That was in 1952 and so most of the Las Vegas strip and areas around there was classified for small tracts, so that became a big program.

Cecil: And what was your job there? I mean, Assistant District

Manager, but what primarily did you work on?

John: First, I might add that Jack Wilson and I were the first employees in BLM to get the classification of Assistant District Manager. My job was to handle all the different duties on the district as an assistant to the District Manager including to serve as the Acting District Manager in his absence.

My primary responsibility was adjudication of grazing privileges on the public lands in the district. The Las Vegas District has two different types of base property requirements being land and water. Water base was new to me. In essence, the range user had to provide adequate water for the number of livestock that the range would accommodate. Water base is used primarily in desert areas where the range can be used year-long.

The land-based property requirement is in the northern part of the district where the range user is required to provide at least 2 months of forage for his livestock. The Las Vegas District also administered about 12 million acres of public domain lands in southern California. These lands were administered under the Section 15 of the Federal Range Code. These lands produced forage only when there was precipitation which was very infrequently like maybe once in 10 years.

About a year before I reported to the Las Vegas District, there was lots of rain, and the desert produced an abundance of palatable forage. The word got out to sheep ranchers in Montana and Wyoming where they were having a severe drought and decided they would take advantage of this available forage. For some unknown reason, the District Manager issued them 10-year leases. The ranchers were very willing to pay for the grazing for that year but in the following years, there was no rain, consequently no forage on the desert. Since the ranchers couldn't use their leases, they refused to pay their annual fees. BLM didn't have any provision for cancelling these leases, so the ranchers went to federal court and won their case. Subsequently, only annual leases were issued.

Cecil: Now you mentioned Montana and Wyoming. Stockmen were trucking their livestock down from Montana and Wyoming to graze the southern California desert?

John: Yes. The desert can sit there for years without any forage as long as there isn't moisture, but with a little moisture, the desert really blossoms out, and there's an abundance of forage and so they took advantage of that.

Cecil: John, is there any particular recollection that you have of other issues that were facing the Bureau at that time of some prominence but were outside of the Las Vegas District?

John: Well, let's see. Those were the days when the Bureau was relatively new and there was a lot of new things coming into being. When I came to work, the BLM Director was Marion Clawson and shortly after I had moved to Nevada, Ed Woosley followed him. There was much more emphasis on managing the public lands. More forage inventories were being done. The big thing in those days was the watershed program. More funds were allocated for work on the range, primarily for erosion control and revegetation. We didn't have much of that except in the northern part of the District on Clover Mountain with a higher elevation and more precipitation. There was quite a bit of watershed work done there. Another big program at that time was eradication of a noxious weed called Halogeton. It was becoming very widespread. The Bureau took on the job of trying to control it. It was done by herbicides and revegetation. It didn't make much difference. It just kept spreading.

Cecil: This control was not very successful?

John: It was not successful and eventually abandoned.

Cecil: Was that an exotic weed that was brought in from like another country or someplace?

John: It was another undesirable weed that was brought in from another country, maybe the Soviet Union. It spread very rapidly in areas with sparse vegetation. The only time that it was

particularly dangerous to livestock is if they were being confined to an area where there was a lot of it and were not getting other forage. They would eat too much of it.

Cecil: If there was nothing else to eat, then they?

John: Right. It was very toxic to sheep especially during trailing.

Cecil: In Montana, when you started out, you were the only one with a professional education background. Was that the same in Las Vegas or?

John: Yes, for the first 2 years in Malta after my first District Manager was no longer there, there was a professional District Manager that came to Malta, and I was under him for maybe 1 year. It was Leland Fallon, and so then we started getting some new professionally trained people. So, I would say that there was probably about a dozen people when I left Malta, and about half of them were professionals.

Cecil: The District staff was composed of a dozen people?

John: Yes.

Cecil: And a good share of those were?

John: Yes, new with professional education background.

Cecil: College trained people?

John: Yes, new college trained people. I might add there were 3 or 4 professionally trained people in the Las Vegas District when I left there in 1957.

Cecil: So, it was building up all over.

John: Yes.

Cecil: Going on from Las Vegas, how long were you there?

John: I was there 5 years from 1952 to 1957.

Cecil: That was quite a while.

John: Right.

Cecil: And, what happened then?

John: I was promoted to District Manager at Winnemucca, Nevada. That was 1957. When I reported there in August, a large portion of the district was on fire. So, that was a good initiation as a new District Manager.

Cecil: Is that a high fire area?

John: Yes, especially that year. We had a large fire crew there. During the summer when it got dry, there was a lot of lightning and some man-caused fires. When I reported there, they told me that all the adjudication was done so that I would not have to worry about adjudication of grazing privileges. But after the fires finally settled down, I got to checking the files and most of the adjudication didn't look that good to me. And so, I talked to the State Director.

Cecil: Who was that?

John: That was Tiny Greenslet at that time. He came out to the

District and after looking over the files, he agreed that the previous adjudications were not acceptable. As a result of this problem, we received several new range positions in order to do range surveys, base property surveys, and to do the other aspects of adjudication. Some of these new employees were Bill Luscher, Neil Morck, Dale Kinniman, and Bill Templeton among others. After many man days of field work, compilation in the office, many hours of meeting with the range users and setting allotment boundaries out in the field and several hearings, the adjudication program was pretty well completed in the 7 years I was there.

Another major program in the district was a special soil and watershed project called the Beowawe Project. This was a sizeable program for erosion control watershed improvement and improvement of forage production. The project involved some water spreading, reseeding, and herbicidal control of undesirable plants allowing more desirable plants to reestablish themselves.

Cecil: What was the GS grade of the District Manager at that time, John?

John: I reported there as a GS-11 and then I was promoted to a 12 and before I left there I was a GS-13.

Cecil: Did you run into much resistance in re-adjudicating the range?

John: Yes, those that had received more than their share were very resistant to the re-adjudication. However, those that felt they were treated unfairly were very happy to be re-adjudicated. We did find some serious inequities that were resolved in most cases. The few that were not resolved went to a hearing before a hearing examiner from the Solicitor's Office. I believe all of those cases were ruled in favor of the Bureau's recommendation.

Cecil: In recent years, there's been quite a bit of anti-

government, at least anti-public land, both BLM and Forest, in Nevada and that was the home of the Sagebrush Rebellion and so forth and up until this day, was there much of that kind of activity then, John?

John: Yes, there was. But probably not to the extent that there is now. The Nevada ranchers were always pretty independent, and the reason probably was that most of their rangeland was federal land. About 86 percent of the state was public land, either Forest Service or BLM. They had used that land for many years without anybody bothering them, and then when the old Grazing Service came into being, they started to object. As things progressed with the Bureau of Land Management, then with more stringent controls, they were not happy about it.

Cecil: Yeah. Were you or any of your people ever actually threatened during that time?

John: No.

Cecil: You didn't have that problem?

John: Not anything serious.

Cecil: What other programs were of significance in the Winnemucca District at that time?

John: There was the fire control and woodland management control program there. Forestry was a viable program that justified a forester. He took care of woodland management and forestry. There was a lot of wildlife in the district, so we initiated a Wildlife Management Program. We had two land examiners and an engineer. There was a total of 20 permanent and 15 temporary employees in the district when I left.

Cecil: Did you have much mineral activity?

John: Not at that time. The mineral activity came into being at a later time. So, we really didn't get involved in the mineral activities.

Cecil: Were the advisory boards very active in District programs at that time?

John: Very active. Yes, very much so. They were very authoritative. The District Manager that was there prior to me let them get away with it. They had a voice that was pretty strong in what went on. We were able to clarify to them that they served in an advisory capacity and not to make the final decisions.

Cecil: What happened after Winnemucca?

John: Let's see, what happened after Winnemucca?

Cecil: Is there life after Winnemucca?

John: Yes, there was. Russ Penny, the State Director at that time, asked me if I would be willing to transfer to the Ely District as the District Manager as there were some problems there that were similar to the ones we resolved in Winnemucca. I was somewhat reluctant about accepting but after I visited the District and talking to some of the District employees and some of the District Advisory Board members, I decided the Ely District would be a challenge and felt better about accepting it. I informed Russ of my decision and commenced with preparations for the move. A day later, Russ called and informed me that the move was off. There was another BLM employee that wanted to move and was willing to accept the Ely District Manager position. Russ said that he knew I wasn't too excited about going to Ely and that there would be better opportunities for me in the near future.

My stay in Winnemucca was rather short lived after that. About 2 months later, I was offered a position on the Soil and Watershed staff in Washington, DC. This seemed to be a good career opportunity, and my family was excited about it, so I accepted.

Cecil: And when was that, John?

John: That was in August of 1964.

Cecil: Uh huh, and how long were you in Washington?

John: I was there 3 years. I started out in the Standards & Technology staff under George Turcott and was there for about 6 months. Due to a reduction in the S&T staff, I was assigned to the Division of Resource Program Management under Ed **Ziadliez**. My duties on the S&T staff were to revise the old Soil and Watershed Manual, and fortunately, my new assignment with the Resource Program Management staff was much more interesting. We had the responsibility to develop budget estimates and program justifications for presentation to the Bureau of Budget and Congress. Also, to prepare program advices and directives to the field offices and also to review the field office programs.

I was also assigned a significant role in the development of the Planning Programming Budgeting System (PPBS) including representing the Bureau at the Departmental level and also to convert (crosswalk) the Bureau's programs into the PPB system for presentation to the Bureau of the Budget. I don't think that the PPBS was fully initiated. I left the Washington Office shortly after that, so I'm not sure.

Cecil: Yeah. Who was the BLM Director in those years that you were in Washington?

John: Can we take a short break?

Cecil: Just before we took the little break there, I had asked John who was the BLM Director during his years in Washington.

John: It was Chuck Stoddard.

Cecil: Yeah, he was Chuck. Mr. Stoddard was Charles Stoddard. Was he the Director all the time you were there, John?

John: Rasmussen came in probably a year before I left there. Anyway, I was there for 3 years almost to the day, and I was on a program review trip to Montana at the time. I was in Malta, and the Washington Office called me and asked me if I would want to transfer back out to the west as the Bureau's representative on the Pacific Southwest River Basin framework studies. I was a little reluctant about it at first. I was to be headquartered in Salt Lake City. So, I made a quick trip to Salt Lake City, and Bob Nielson welcome me with open arms. He introduced me to his staff at a staff meeting. And so, I felt real good about it.

Cecil: John, excuse me a second. We're running out of tape and we have to take a brief intermission and turn the tape over.

**TAPE ENDED**

Cecil: This is side two of the first tape of the oral history interview with John Russiff on June 4th, 1996. Okay, John, before we had to turn the tape over, you were telling us about your interview with State Director Bob Nielson in Salt Lake.

John: Well anyway, as I mentioned after he welcomed me and introduced me to his staff, we went to his office and had a very detailed discussion on the River Basin Study, what he thought my role would be in the study, and the type of expertise that would be needed to adequately represent BLM on the Study. After our discussion, I decided that this would be a good opportunity to get some new experience and a chance to get back out west with a promotion, so I accepted the assignment.

When I got back to Washington, it was decided that it would be better if I was headquartered in Denver, Colorado, rather than Salt Lake City, so I wound up being in the Colorado State Office. Ed Rowland was the State Director.

Cecil: Well, let's pick it up with what you were talking about coming to Denver.

John: My first job after arriving in Denver was to set up an office and to hire a staff which included a secretary and a resource specialist with an economics background. There was also one full-time resource specialist in each of the other five states involved in the study. The other states involved in the study other than Colorado were Utah, Nevada, California, Arizona, and Wyoming.

I had the responsibility of coordinating and advising these people on the River Basin Study matters. I was also BLM's representative on the study to provide BLM data input and ensure that appropriate consideration of public land matters in the study. The Southwest River Basin study was referred to as a water and related land resources study for the Pacific Southwest. It was an inventory of water, water needs, including water needs for related land resources.

The other agencies involved in the study were the Bureau of Reclamation, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, and the six states in the study area.

Cecil: Who was the principal agent, agency, or driving force behind it?

John: Bureau of Reclamation.

Cecil: And what was the objective of the study?

John: It was to get a better handle on the water situation in

the Pacific Southwest. It was primarily an inventory of water, water needs, how the land was involved to determine water needs. The driving force was to resolve the water shortages in the Pacific Southwest.

Cecil: And what came out of this study? Was it used as a basis for action or decision?

John: There was some very good information that came out of that study, and I assume it was used a lot by all the different agencies. The study didn't continue on after that to really reach the goals that were expected.

Cecil: You were the ranking Bureau representative to the study?

John: Right.

Cecil: And to whom did you report in the organization.

John: The Planning staff in the Washington Office.

Cecil: Was this information that was generated and gathered for the Southwest Basin Study integrated into the BLM land use planning system?

John: To a certain extent it was. It was a very good source of information available for planning and other purposes.

Cecil: Is there any other particulars about that assignment?

John: Not that I can recall.

Cecil: What happened after that?

John: After the Pacific Southwest River Basin study was completed, it was uncertain as to what my future in BLM was going to be. Fortunately, the Chief, Division of Resources position became vacant in the Colorado State Office, and I was transferred into that position.

Cecil: Mr. Rowland was still State Director at that time?

John: Yes. Ed Rowland was the State Director.

Cecil: During that time that you were the Chief of Resources, what were some of the principal issues that you were facing in that job and in Colorado that the Bureau was facing.

John: The big thing was the Energy and Minerals Program in Colorado. A large oil shale deposit existed in the Piceance Basin in northwest Colorado. There was a great interest to develop this resource, but due to low cost of importing oil, the oils shale development was deferred. Coal, oil and gas, and uranium also are present in significant quantities. Coal leasing was a very large program in Colorado. Our duties in the Division of Resources were to develop policies and guidance in these program as well as other programs such as lands, range management, forestry, wildlife, recreation, and archeology.

We were also responsible for assuring compliance with the National Environment Policy Act in all of these programs involving a number of Environmental Assessment Reports plus the Environment Statement for the Foothills Project of the Denver Water Board and others.

Cecil: Back on the tape. Before we took a little break there, John was talking about some of the activities and issues during his tenure as Chief, Division of Resources, in the Colorado State Office. Why don't we pick it up there, John, and go on?

John: In addition to the National Environmental Policy Act, there was also the Federal Land Policy & Management Act of 1976, which changed the way we looked at the management of the public lands involved a number of additional responsibilities to the Bureau and the workload in the Division of Resources.

With the added responsibilities and workload, the Division of Resources was split up into three branches with a Branch Chief heading each one. The three branches were Biological Sciences, Lands and Recreation, and Energy and Minerals. In the 9 years from 1971 to 1979, the staff in the Division of Resources grew from 15 to 37.

In December 1979, I retired from BLM and pursued a new career as a part-time private consultant for a period of 12 years.

Cecil: Okay. Thanks very much, John. This will be the end of the oral history interview with John Russiff